

CHICAGO FIRE

Tragedy struck with sudden and horrible fury as a fire in Our Lady of the Angela Elementary School on Chicago's northwest side snuffed out at least ninety three lives. Ninety of them known dead were in the fourth, sixth and eighth grades; three of the teaching nuns at the school were also victims of one of Chicago's worst fire tragedies. The fire broke out on the second floor of the north wing of the U-shaped school building just thirty minutes before classes were to be dismissed for the day. Every piece of available fire equipment was rushed to the scene; ambulances were lined up for several blocks to rush the injured to six area hospitals. Police closed off the area around the school as a special disaster plan was put into effect. A grim faced Richard Daley, Chicago's mayor, rushed to the scene of the blaze, as did Chicago's newly installed Roman Catholic Archbishop Albert Meyer, who later visited victims and bereaved parents in the several hospitals where injured were taken. Priests of Our Lady of the Angels parish and surrounding parishes were at the fire scene to administer the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church to the dead and dying. The cause of the fire was undetermined, but Chicago Fire Commissioner Robert Quinn is conducting an intensive investigation into the possibility of arson; FBI agents are working with a picked squad of investigators to determine the cause of the blaze. The fire was first believed to have been started when the school boiler exploded, but the boiler was discovered to be intact. The flames spread with amazing speed; searchers found twenty four children sitting in one room at their desks, books open before them - the children were dead. Many children were killed or seriously injured when they leaped screaming from the second floor of the two story brick structure. Nearly a hundred children of a student body of fourteen hundred and several nuns were injured; many of these were in

critical condition. Unable to find lost children, distraught parents sought information at the hospitals where the injured were taken. At Saint Anne's Hospital grief stricken parents pleaded for news of missing children; hospital personnel were unable to keep pace with the mounting toll, although all available doctors and nurses were on duty. The scene at the Cook County Morgue, where the bodies of the dead were taken, was one of stark grief as numbed parents were called on to identify bodies of their children. Cook County Coroner Walter McCarron said that many of the bodies were burned beyond recognition and the heartbreaking task of identification may take several days. At the gutted school, turned to a flaming tomb by an as yet unexplained explosion, searchers continued their grim task of combing the ruins far into the night as parishioners of Our Lady of the Angels Church gathered to pray for the dead, the dying and the missing in a tragedy that has struck deep at the heart of Chicago.